

Cruising the L.A. CIGAR CLUBS

By Laura Schiff

WHEN ACTRESS/COMEDIAN Jenny McCarthy appeared on the cover of *Newsweek* in July 1997 with a cigar in her hand, it confirmed for the rest of the nation what Hollywood has known for quite some time: "sticks" are the hip new status symbol, and not just for men. So I hit the L.A. cigar lounge circuit.

The best place to begin an evening of fine cigar smoking is at Arnold Schwarzenegger's restaurant, Schatzi on Main, in Santa Monica. Schatzi collaborates with The Main Smoke, a cozy shop located 50 feet from the restaurant entrance, to provide cigars for their customers. Says cigar salesman Jeb Freedman, "We probably have about a hundred different brands of cigars, in various sizes. Our highest end cigars are Macanudo, Partagas and La Gloria Cubana. The La Gloria Cubanas are getting very hard to find these days. We always have them, in some part through our association with Schatzi, since Schwarzenegger has gone on record as saying that he smokes those."

I purchase a mild, flavorful Santa Damiana and head for Schatzi's outdoor patio, where we have a reservation. "I feel like I'm sitting on someone's porch in Louisiana," smiles Liza Moore, happily puffing on a Gregorio Elite. The menu is excellent, featuring Austrian specialties weinerschnitzel and bratwurst. "I come here every couple of weeks," says Clark O'Brien, a casually dressed patron from Manhattan Beach. "The people are very friendly."

Our next stop is the posh Peninsula Hotel in Beverly Hills for after-dinner drinks. They have a wide selection of liqueurs, including Aquavite, Frambois, and Grand Marnier. The hotel Club Bar is standing-room-only, and I notice that this crowd is a

bit more conservative than Schatzi's, mostly consisting of business people in suits. "Milton Berle usually comes in here two or three times a month," says Food & Beverage Manager John Rucci. "We get lots of other celebrities in here, too." Their selection of cigars is small but varied, ranging in price from \$5-20. "People enjoy the mystique of puffing on a good cigar. Women like it because it's a little bit unusual and I think it makes a statement. The women who smoke cigars usually aren't the shrinking violet types. They tend to have a lot of self-confidence," Ricci adds.

If you're looking for the ultimate cigar smoking experience in Los Angeles, the place to be is Overstreet's & Hamilton's Fine Cigars and Bar, within walking distance from The Peninsula. This is where we head to top off our night in grand style.

The establishment actually consists of several bars in one. There's the main room, called the Hamilton Overstreet Bar, and a sports bar, called Overstreet's. I'm partial to the Raj Room, which features plush velvet sofas, live music and walls lined with bottles of some of the finest wines in Los Angeles. "This whole wall is Chateaux Petrus," says Michael O'Day, manager of The Raj Room. "There's 150 bottles of Petrus, and I think it goes back to 1949." Overstreet's & Hamilton's boasts the largest selection of small batch bourbons and single malt scotches in the city. I savor a Bookers, while my friend falls in love with a 14-year-old St. Auban scotch.

Overstreet's & Hamilton's offers an enormous variety of cigars, including the rare Fuente Fuente Opus X. "These are very hard to come by, very prestigious," says Debra Meringa, the resident cigar



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expert. Sales are limited to two per person. "I compare cigars to wine," Meringa continues, "in that when you're drinking a bottle of wine, you might taste notes of berry or notes of cherry. It's the same thing with a cigar. Some are actually aged, like our vintage Macanudo, a highly rated cigar that's made in Jamaica. The Felipe Gregorio from Honduras is a very enjoyable, smooth smoke. It has a lot of spice. Ashton makes a tiny little Cordial that the ladies really like." I choose a spicy Fuente Short Story, while my companion, Adam Sigel, enjoys Fuente's Hemingway Especial. "This is the cigar of the gods," he declares.

Next, manager Jack Griffith takes us on a guided tour of the rest of the establishment. There are private humidors and wine cellars for rent, leased to such well-known personages as Whoopi Goldberg, Milton Berle, Frank Sinatra, Henry Mancini and George Hamilton. My favorite location is The Cuban Room, an incredible secret chamber hidden behind an upstairs bookcase and decorated to look like Havana in 1959. Outfitted with leopard skin sofas, the room can seat up to 15 people. "In this room we've had David Duchovny and Timothy Hutton," says Griffith.

Now this is living. I shudder to think what will become of this wonderful haven if a proposed California state law is passed in 1998 to ban smoking in public venues. "A lot of pressure has been put on senators and government representatives by business owners regarding this issue," says Griffith. Adds The Peninsula's Rucci, "You'll start to see a lot of patios being built on the roofs of Los Angeles' best restaurants to accommodate those who wish to smoke."